

Venetian Merchant Tales:  
What Can be Found Concerning European Thoughts of the East Before De Gama  
from the Stories of  
Marco Polo and Niccoló di Conti

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HST 496

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November 9, 2010

## Introduction

Before Europeans looked to uncover the secrets of the New World in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the East was the main origin of fascination and curiosity for Europeans who wondered at what lay beyond the known world. Contact with the Near East in the Crusades spawned stories of all sorts that sparked the imagination of readers in Europe. It is made clear in the work of James S. Romm that Europeans had speculated about what lay outside the boundaries of the known world, or *oikoumenē*, pointing to authorities like Homer, Aristotle, Herodotus, Strabo, Alexander the Great, Pliny and many others who influenced the way Europeans thought about this world beyond.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of the East for the patrician literati of the High and Late Middle Ages (c. 1150-1500) still relied heavily on the ancient sources, even as accounts from Churchmen sent into the East came back with first hand accounts. It would take a romantic tale told to a man in a Genoese prison in 1298 by a simple Venetian merchant called Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324) to begin a challenge to these ancient concepts of the East. The accounts of later merchants like Niccoló di Conti (1385-1469) forced European literati to re-think their concepts of the Far East based on the ancients. It needs to be asked whether Polo and Conti were changing the way Europeans thought about the East and if there were changes in the way Europeans felt about the East after reading Polo, can we see the difference in how Conti related his journey 124 years later? Or did Polo's story have little impact on the European mindset? Yet another question the reader must ask themselves is: does Conti's story fail to show change that can be attributed to Polo's tale or does it show signs that the European mind was still firmly rooted in the classical authorities? Of course there could be many conclusions drawn by comparing the stories of Polo, who traveled from 1269 to 1293, and Conti whose travels lasted

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<sup>1</sup> James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1992).

from 1419 to 1444, but these are the questions the following sections will try to answer by examining the points of interests for our two merchant travelers.

### **Explanation of Primary Sources**

When looking at the three primary sources for this investigation it is important to remember many pitfalls that affect any sources before the modern era, and especially before printing. First of all, can a definitive author be found and secondly, how close are current copies to the original? Think of the classic example of the Homeric Epics which have never been traced to a single author and survived only because of much later Greek and Roman manuscripts which are also subject to scrutiny. Perhaps the greatest puzzle of literature in the Western tradition is the Bible, Scholars have debated continuously for millennia the origin of its texts and what mistakes have been made in it through centuries of translation and copying. In the case of Polo and Conti, it is not as confusing as these ancient examples as to who the original authors were, yet even here there is doubt that Rustichello de Piza, a fellow prisoner of Polo and traditionally held author of Polo's account, even authored the original Polo manuscript.<sup>2</sup> The more important issue comes with the second problem mentioned above: which copies available today are closest to the original? For the Polo texts as of 1928, scholars including L.F. Benedetto (1886-1966), Henry Yule (1820-89), and Henri Cordier (1827-1905) had compiled at least 138 (140 at present according to modern travel writer Colin Thubron) manuscripts (MSS) of Polo that can be followed back to five different source MSS.<sup>3</sup> Each of these sources, and also the 140 MSS that have come down through them are different. Thubron states that "The proliferating manuscripts

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<sup>2</sup> N.M. Penzer, Introduction to: *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, Together with the travels of Nicolò De' Conti*, trans. and ed. John Frampton and N. M. Penzer, (London: The Argonaut Press, 1929), xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xviii-xix.

of the *Description of the World* have spawned a scholarly industry.... [W]hole passages defy chronological order. Other chapters seem truncated, as if half lost. There are translations at three or four times remove[d] from any supposed original, and clerical errors have sent up a trail of Chinese whispers.”<sup>4</sup> Thubron asserts that out of these 140 different MSS, there are only two main versions that are considered by scholars for historical scrutiny and one of them is William Marsden’s (1754-1836) translation which is used in the 2008 reprint researched here.<sup>5</sup>

In order to avoid confusion and move on towards the goal of looking for signs of European outlooks in the East, these technical difficulties must be set aside and the traditional story of how Marco Polo set his story in writing needs to be told. The most widely accepted story is that Polo was taken prisoner and placed in a Genoese jail after the battle of Curzola in 1298. Here he happened to share time with a fellow prisoner named Rustichello de Piza.<sup>6</sup> This Rustichello also happened to be a Franco-Italian writer (a literary language common at the time for romances), who also wrote tales of King Arthur and other romances.<sup>7</sup> It is not known if Polo simply dictated from memory or had access to his merchant log or not, but over the course of a two years Rustichello created what recently deceased Glasgow University Professor John Larner termed “The Book” or original MS of Polo’s story. As was mentioned above, “The Book” became a living MS that morphed into 140 different MSS, but the most famous and fantastic version was recalled and embellished in 1550 by Gian Battista Ramusio (1485-1557), or as

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Thubron, in Polo, *Travels*, xv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 48.

orientalist Norman Mosley Penzer calls him, “the Italian Hakluyt.”<sup>8</sup> Ramusio claimed to have found other original texts besides the ones that were well known at the time and looked to popularize Polo even further by adding embellishments and leaving out other parts in order to attract a wider audience. Penzer puts it this way: “Here is a man who has selected a distinctly ragged garment (the Pipino text), with the intent to make it look new by the addition of various patches (here he lists other texts). Some of the patches are of very good material, but others are frayed and badly put on, and moreover, not always in the best places.”<sup>9</sup> Keep in mind that Rumusio was editing his Polo tale only some 250 years after the events recorded in his *Navigazioni et Viaggi*. Now, 700 years and over a hundred versions later from that period in the Genoese jail cell, it has become even harder to piece together Polo’s story.

Thanks in part to their relative unpopularity during their time; the texts that make up the primary sources for Niccoló di Conti’s journey in the East are fairly straight-forward in their authorship and authenticity. Unlike Polo, who happened to be imprisoned with a little known romance author, Conti was summoned to Florence to meet with one of the giants of renaissance humanism, Poggio (Bracciolini) of Florence, a papal secretary to Pope Eugenius IV. Because of this, there was little chance that the manuscript record could be diluted in the same way it had been for Polo. Yet, it was by chance that Conti met the author of the second primary source of his journey, Pero Tafur, who was himself a traveler of the (near) East and someone whom Conti traveled with for a short time in Syria. But here too, the author soundly published his book and this helped prevent the confusion endured by the Polo MSS. The only problem that arises from

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<sup>8</sup> Penzer, intro to: *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, Together with the travels of Nicolò De’ Conti*, xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xxix.

these sources is that of translation problems. One of the criticisms of Poggio which Dr. Kennon Breazeale, coordinator of the East-West Center in Yokohama, points out in his article *Editorial Introduction to Nicolò de' Conti's Account* is that Poggio most likely misinterpreted Conti, who spoke in his Venetian dialect, by writing his account in Latin and not including an Italian record for comparison.<sup>10</sup> It is also interesting to know that Poggio met with Conti in 1439 but did not publish the work that included Conti's story until 1448 under the title *De Varietate Fortunae* (*The Vicissitudes of Fortune*). So whether Poggio's notes from his meeting with Conti remained intact and reliable before Poggio actually set to writing is also debatable.<sup>11</sup> The version being used for this research is that which was recommended by Breazeale, which is the Lincoln Davis Hammond translation (1963) of the John Winter Jones (1857) translation of *India Recognita* (1492), printed by Cristoforo da Bollate, which included Poggio's *De Varietate Fortunae*. Breazeale believes this translation to be the best available because of "Hammond's careful retranslation of the 1857 Jones edition (which appears in its original in R.H. Major's collection *India in the Fifteenth Century...*), using the original 1492 Latin edition..." and includes the "explanatory notes" that Jones added.<sup>12</sup>

Pero Tafur's text *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439* includes the chance encounter he had with Conti while traveling along the Red Sea. Malcolm Letts, who translated Tafur's book into English in 1926, tells us that one copy of Tafur's MS survived and was found in the library of the Colegio mayor de S. Bartolomé de Cuenca in Salamanca. The evidence from this MS proved that it was a 17<sup>th</sup> century copy of an original that used the same manner of speech as

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<sup>10</sup> Kennon Breazeale, "Editorial Introduction to Nicolò de' Conti's Account," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 2, no.2 (Autumn 2004): 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 108.

Tafur's time.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Poggio who traveled and studied across Europe, Tafur was an accomplished traveler and adventurer in the Near East. Like Conti, he had traveled in Muslim guise in order to visit places that were restricted to Christians. For Conti, telling the story of his times in the East to Tafur would have been much less formal and much more relaxed than when he had to sit down with Poggio to explain why he had renounced his faith and lived among the Muslims for so long. Could this relaxed attitude towards Tafur be the reason Conti talks so much about Prestor John during the course of their journey compared to the Poggio account or was it Tafur who chose to write so much about Prestor John and left out other details told to him by Conti? In the brief account that Tafur writes about his time with Conti (11-12 pages), Tafur spends most of the time recounting Conti's meetings with this legendary Eastern Christian King. In the somewhat larger account compiled by Poggio, Prester John is not even hinted at. Tafur met Conti before Poggio did, and it seems unlikely that Conti would talk so much about this one topic and fail completely to mention it in the wider context that Poggio recorded. Therefore, it is probable that Tafur placed the material about "Prester John" into Conti's story because of his own need to believe in Christian dominance. This causes the reader to examine Tafur's relation of Conti with a grain of salt. Yet, these inconsistencies that exist in the primary sources are also important in showing us how European authors interpreted the East and found ways to express it in terms others could understand.

### **Setting/Characters**

Besides being Venetian merchants, we do not know if Polo and di Conti had much else in common. In fact, we know very little about Marco Polo outside of his account and almost

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Letts, in the introduction to: Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, trans. & ed. Malcolm Letts, (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 1926, 2005), 1.

nothing personally about di Conti besides what he tells us about his family, which was created while in India. It is thought that Polo was born either in the city of Venice itself or on an island on the Dalmatian coast (Korčula?). In any case, the sources agree that his father Niccoló and uncle Maffeo were away in the East when Marco was born and did not come back until Marco was 15 years old and his mother had died some years before.<sup>14</sup> Marco's journey to the East commenced two years later and for the next 24 years his *Travels* record his exploits during this part of his life. Upon his return, he appears to have been content to live out the rest of his days as a modest merchant but had the misfortune of being captured in one of the frequent naval battles between commercial rivals Venice and Genoa. It is believed that while in a Genoese prison Marco related his story and gave his notes on his journey to the East to Rustichello de Piza, a fellow prisoner and Franco-Italian romance writer and the rest is history. Little is known beyond this except for vital records that show that he lived the rest of his life in Venice with his wife Donata Badoer and his three children, Fantina, Bellela and Moreta.<sup>15</sup> Colin Thubron tells us in his introduction to Polo's *Travels*, "Urchins, it was said, would follow Polo through the lanes crying out 'Messer Marco, tell us another lie!'," and on his deathbed pious relatives begged him to recant his taller stories.<sup>16</sup> To which he allegedly said that "he had not told one half of what he had really seen!"<sup>17</sup>

What is known about di Conti is that he was a teenager in Damascus, where he learned Arabic and spent some time near the Euphrates River where he learned Persian.<sup>18</sup> For 25 years

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<sup>14</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. trans. William Marsden, ed. Peter Harris, intro. Colin Thubron (New York: Everyman's Library, 2008), xv.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Thubron in Polo, *Travels*, xvi.

<sup>17</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Breazeale, "Editorial Introduction," 101.



he traveled in the East, mostly up and down the Indian coasts, Persia, and around the islands of modern day Indonesia. He took a wife in India and had 4 children when he was forced to convert to Islam near the end of his journey. He lost his wife and 2 of his children to plague in Egypt shortly after parting ways with Pero Tafur.<sup>19</sup> He then was summoned to Florence to give his account to the papal secretary Poggio (Bracciolini) of Florence because of his denouncement of the Christian faith. He was forgiven and allowed to return to Venice where records show that he continued to be involved in the cereal and oil trade.<sup>20</sup> Both Polo and Conti had experienced something that few Europeans had experienced in their times, and the records of both of their travels need historical background in order to be contrasted.

The Orient has for a long time fascinated Europeans. From the stories of Marco Polo down through the Victorian age, Europeans had developed concepts about the East, starting with the curious and turning into the fashionable. Though the journeys of our two merchants were separated by more than a century, in their time, the East was still just a curiosity supplemented by sparse accounts of churchmen like John of Plano Carpini (c.1180-1252), William of Rubruck (c.1220- c. 1293). These accounts were coupled with ancient literature on the subject, most notably from Pliny the Elder (23-79). Larner sees the popularity of Polo and Conti's accounts stemming from their "wide angle lens vision" that set them apart from Carpini and Rubruck.<sup>21</sup> Yet, Polo and Conti's tales had a long way to go to overturn the authority of Pliny and other ancient authors in whom the humanists placed such trust. Our travelers seem to fight an uphill battle against these conventions, and at some points in their narratives, events are embellished for

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<sup>19</sup> "From Niccolo dei Conti: *Italian Merchant and Traveler*," in *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia Volume One A to F*, ed. Jennifer Speake (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 278.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 97.

dramatic effect. But the worlds they describe have still turned out to be much more factual than Pliny's or even Mandeville's, which stole the thunder from the more mundane accounts of the East.<sup>22</sup>

Like Carpini and Rubruck, Polo came to Cathay during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) or Mongol rule of Northern China. The Mongols ruled over an empire that included most of China, Central Asia past the Black Sea, and into Mesopotamia and Turkey.<sup>23</sup> Kublai Khan (r.1260-1294) was Great Khan of the Mongols, meaning that the other khanates were subject to him, and made a capital for his dynasty called Dadu (modern Beijing) to rule personally over the Han Chinese part of his empire. The Mongols had a policy of giving administrative positions not to native Chinese people, but to other ethnic groups. In fact, the Mongols gave Muslim Uyghurs (A Turkish group), Nestorian Christians, and other minor ethnic groups positions to govern the Han Chinese majority in China. This policy is important for Polo's account of his stay in Kublai's domains because it lends some creditability to his claims the Polos were made officials at court, military engineers, and Marco himself a governor of a province.<sup>24</sup> When the Polos were sent from Cathay for the Ilkhanate (Persia) in 1291 to deliver a bride to its ruler Arghun (c.1258-1291), they did not leave Mongol controlled land until departing from Trebizond in 1293. The expanse of the Mongol domains and their influence in the East create the largest differences when compared to the accounts of Conti 124 years later; the difference in European attitudes towards the East, however, had changed very little.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>23</sup> Rafis Abazov, *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), Map 24.

<sup>24</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 202-03.

The East that Niccoló di Conti experienced was in some ways very similar to that which Polo experienced and was in ways that he most likely could not have known, very different. India and the islands surrounding it where Conti spent most of his time in the East, remained small independent kingdoms with notable, distinctive characteristics from one place to the next. Some of the same goods and customs that Polo came across on his travels also find their way into Conti's accounts. For instance, both men talk about tattoos as black spots being permanently placed in the skin,<sup>25</sup> and both tell about the practice of Suttee<sup>26</sup> (wives being burned alive with deceased husbands) and many other oddities that piqued both of their interests. Whereas many of the day to day customs and tradable goods remained the same in 124 years between their journeys, the larger political landscape of the East had changed greatly. Most notable was the absence of the Mongol Empire in the places Conti traveled. The Mongols were now confined to parts of Tibet and Mongolia, but Conti would have encountered the Mongol remnant called the Timurid Dynasty (1370-1526) in the Persian domains of the former Ilkhanate. Though Conti did not travel to Cathay, he did relate some second-hand information to Poggio about a Great Khan still ruling there.<sup>27</sup> Conti was probably talking about the Ming emperor, possibly one of the most well known Ming emperors, the Yongle Emperor (r.1402-1424). The Ming (1368-1644) established the last Han Chinese ruling dynasty and forced the Mongols who Polo knew so well to the peripheries. Unlike the Mongols, the Ming had no interests in hiring foreigners or non-Han Chinese people as officials. In addition to this, after the Yongle Emperor's death, interest in foreign trade and diplomacy had declined in China, further limiting

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 190. & Poggio Bracciolini "From *The Indies Rediscovered*," In *Travelers In Disguise: Narratives Of Eastern Travel By Poggio Bracciolini And Ludovico De Varthema*, ed. Lincoln Davis Hammond, trans. John Winter Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 59. & Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 17.

Conti's knowledge of Cathay. There were other differences that changed Conti's experience from Polo's. Most of the western remnants of the Mongol Empire, who in Polo's time had no qualms about trading with any ethnic or religious group, were not only politically weakened but had also converted to Islam. This would not have been such a great problem for Conti and other western merchants except that in 1291 Acre fell to the Mamluks and soon thereafter, trade with Muslims was forbidden by the Papacy.<sup>28</sup> For this reason Conti had to travel "by means of hazardous subterfuge," pretending to be a Arab Muslim in order to trade beyond the near East and as far as Southern China and Sumatra.<sup>29</sup> Though Conti was the first accounts among Russian traveler Afanasii Nikitin (in the East 1466-1472), Portuguese spies Pero De Covilha and Alfonso de Paiva (in the East 1487 to the end of their lives), and Ludovico de Varthema (in the East from 1502-1508). These are the others who traveled in a similar manner near Conti's time.<sup>30</sup> This fact also illustrates why Conti's account 124 years after Polo's was of such importance to the scholarly community in Europe because so few westerners took the chance to go to these forbidden regions and even fewer had their story told for posterity.

### **Economy/Trade**

When reading the accounts of our travelers, one does not get far without encountering the valuables, currency, and trades that each place they visit has to offer. It should not be a surprise, since finding a profit was what they did for a living. Silk, gold, spices, pearls, rubies, textiles, salt, copper, and even more goods captured their imagination. A sample description from each

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<sup>28</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> J.H. Parry, "From *Travel in Disguise*." in *The European Reconnaissance*, ed. J.H Parry, (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 1968), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Jane Maxwell, "Afanasii Nikitin: An Orthodox Russian's Spiritual Voyage in the Dar al-Islam," *Journal of World History* 17, no. 3 (September 2006): 247.

will illustrate this point and also illustrate other points that will be made later. We see here the typical Polo and Conti formula of awe factor plus religion plus natural and acquired wealth equals complete description. This sample is from Marco Polo: (hereafter Polo #1)

Singui [Suzhou] is a large and magnificent city, the circumference of which is twenty miles. The inhabitants are idolaters, subjects of the grand khan, and use his paper money. They have vast quantities of raw silk, and manufacture it, not only for their own consumption, all of them being clothed in dresses of silk, but also for other markets. There are amongst them some very rich merchants, and the number of inhabitants is so great as to be a subject of astonishment.<sup>31</sup>

From di Conti: (hereafter Conti #1)

After this he [Conti] went to Cambay (Khambhat), which he reached in fifteen days. Cambay is westward, situated near the sea, and is thirteen miles in circuit; it abounds in spikenard (used in perfumes), lac (a type of dye), indigo, myrobalans (fruits known for healing properties) and silks. There are priests here who are called Bachali; they only marry one wife... Wild cattle are found in abundance, with manes like those of horses but with longer hair and with horns so long that when their head is turned back they touch the tail.<sup>32</sup>

In each instance it is clear that there is an effort to list almost systematically the items that the merchants came across on their travels as a memory aid just as significant as the religious and fantastic aspects of each place.

The travelers also paid attention to the peculiar currency spotted along their journeys and noted the paper money and coins being used. Polo mentions (Polo #1) the Khan's paper money, which was used across the empire while Polo was in the East and could be exchanged for silver. Polo found it remarkable that the Khan paid his armies with paper money. He decided it was further proof that the Khan's control of treasure was beyond any other ruler's because even this enormous army, which Polo described earlier, accepted it with the same faith they would have in

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<sup>31</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 208.

<sup>32</sup> Bracciolini, *India Rediscovered*, 23.

gold or silver.<sup>33</sup> The Khan's paper money was long gone by the time Conti made it to the East, but he still managed to find places that used other forms of paper currency. He tells us that only in Cambay had he witnessed paper money; otherwise he finds gold and silver coins and even Venetian ducats in circulation in parts of India.<sup>34</sup> Whether this paper money was a leftover or influenced by the Mongol's paper money is unclear to us, and this issue was not even considered by Conti. But because he took note of it in the only place where he saw it, it stands to reason that even after a century, the concept of paper money was well outside of the ordinary for Europeans.

Another aspect of the economic structure of the East that both travelers noticed was the extent of trading that involved Muslims, referred to by our travelers as Mahometans or Saracens. The western frontiers of China were in commercial contact with Islamic peoples like the Uyghurs (of Turkish ethnicity) even before the Song Dynasty (960-1279) thanks to the famous Silk Road. When Mongol rule came to Northern China and was spread west of the Black Sea by Kublai Khan's grandfather Genghis (r.1206-1227), he made a point of preserving and even enhancing trade among the Mongols and the Sultanates who were among his newly acquired lands as well as those Muslim dominions still outside of his control. Sometimes Muslims resisted trade with the Mongols, and the Mongols response was usually to force the opening of commercial relations. This happened with the Khwarazmshah, a once proud Central Asian Muslim empire that now felt the pressure of Genghis' expanding empire. After signing a treaty that would allow Mongol merchants to trade with the Muslims of his region, the Sultan of Khwarazmshah's soldiers massacred the first Mongol caravan in 1218 near Utrar, and then shut

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<sup>33</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Bracciolini, 36.

its doors to trade with the Mongols.<sup>35</sup> This spurred a military campaign that would eventually strike at the heartland of many other Muslim domains, including that of the Abbasid Caliphate, concluding with the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 by Helegu Khan. Despite the violence by which these Muslim peoples were brought into the Mongol Empire, they were allowed relative freedom of travel and encouraged in the merchant trade. As was mentioned earlier, the Mongols even preferred foreigners for high positions in administration, especially in China by the time of the Yuan. Marco Polo noticed many Muslim merchants in Cathay, trading on a regular basis with Mongols and Han Chinese merchants. Sociologist and proponent of the World Systems Theory Janet Abu-Lughod notes how Polo always gives the impression that he is a unique merchant in Cathay because “it is obvious that these foreign merchants are Muslims from all parts of the heartland of the thirteenth-century world system. For them the Khan’s domains are no new discovery; they are a natural and integral part of their world.”<sup>36</sup>

In stark contrast, Conti spends his 25 years in the East acting as a Muslim among other Muslim merchants in a Muslim dominated world. As opposed to Polo, Conti was not lucky enough to travel in an area where it was all right to practice any religion he chose, therefore he was forced to be totally immersed in the ways of those merchants whom Polo found so numerous among the Mongols. There is a sharp discrepancy when it comes to comparing the typical descriptions that Polo and Conti give when traveling in areas where the dominant religion is Islam (see for example Polo #1 and Conti #1). Whereas Polo always mentions where encounters Muslims, Conti does not. In fact, Conti is much more likely to find it worth noting where he

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<sup>35</sup> Xinru Lui. *The Silk Road in World History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112.

<sup>36</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 167.

finds Christians than Muslims because the presence of Muslims is not note-worthy to him. From Polo's curiosity of finding so many Muslim merchants in the Far East to Conti's indifference to finding Muslims in the Far East, it becomes clear that both men, 124 years apart, entered a similar economic world that was dominated by Muslim traders but that they looked at it in a completely different way.

The Venetian blood of both men flowed for making of profit, and the economic oddities and the valuables that could be traded were their basic memories of every place they visited. When they spoke to Rustichello, Poggio, or Tafur, it is uncertain whether they had notes from their travels or if they simply had to remember off hand. Since trade was their profession and purpose for being in the East, it stands to reason that their knowledge of what they experienced was rooted in the business they concluded.

### **Awe factor**

One of the hallmarks of travel tales that give the reader some of the best insights into how Europeans dealt with the unknown are their descriptions of the truly fantastic. Though Polo and Conti's authors appear not to go as far as Mandeville with the inclusion of fantastic staples from Pliny, Isadore of Seville, and other earlier writers, our traveler's stories included many curiosities that added shock value for audiences in Europe. Some of these curiosities have already been mentioned like paper money and tattoos, which might raise the brow of a few learned men back home. But what widened the eyes of the more casual literati of the day were stories about cannibals, mythical animals, and intriguing sexual habits. John Larner makes the observation that Boccaccio's story from the *Decameron* (VI, 10), compiled between Polo and Conti's journeys in the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century and telling the fictional story of Fra Cipolla and his sermon to explain the authenticity of a made up "relic" to a crowd of eager onlookers, illustrates two



important things about Italian society: that people loved fantastic travel stories, and that Boccaccio, and others, were tired of “travel-narratives which, he (Boccaccio) holds, were popularly associated with the Book of the Venetian Marco Polo.”<sup>37</sup> Around the same time of the *Decameron*, Mandeville tales began to overshadow Polo’s Book, says Larner, but Conti’s strange encounters nearly a century later, which Poggio wrote down, shows that fantastic tales were still a very important element of European travel tales.<sup>38</sup>

Marco Polo, with the help of Rustichello de Piza, garnered wide appeal in large part because of a general awe inspired by just having gone some place very few Europeans had been. Even some of the mundane aspects of his travels in the East captured the European imagination in a way that is hard to appreciate today. For the most part, Polo, who probably had little to no knowledge of previous travel legends, described by observation rather than jumping to conclusions as a traveler well steeped in the works of the ancient travel authorities might have done. It is also necessary to note the changes in translations that dull the impact of what Polo was describing to a European audience. For example, the difference in language, even among English translations from the John Frampton translation from 1579 to the William Marsden translation of 1818, show the ways in which scholars have tried to squeeze the awe factor out of the works by applying knowledge procured after the fact to Polo’s 13<sup>th</sup> century mind. In these two samples of the same part of Polo’s tale, in this case Frampton’s chapter 111 (Marsden: Bk. III. Chs. XI,XII) the difference is apparent. The Frampton sample is the complete description of rhinoceroses; the Marsden sample is truncated from the full description.

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<sup>37</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 106.

The John Frampton version:

In this realme there be Apes of diuerſe forts, and Unicornes, little leſſe than Elephants, hauing a head like vnto a fwyne, and alwayſes hanging it downward to the grounde, and ſtandeth with a good will in Cieno or miery puddle. They haue but one horne in their forehead, whereby only they are called Unicornes, theyr horne is large and blacke, their tong is rough and full of prickles long and thicke.<sup>39</sup>

The William Marsden version:

In the country are many wild elephants and rhinoceroses, which latter are much inferior in size to the elephant, but their feet are similar. Their hide resembles that of the buffalo. In the middle of the forehead they have a single horn; but with this weapon they do not injure those whom they attack, employing only for this purpose their tongue, which is armed with long, sharp spines and their knees or feet... They are not of that description of animals which suffer themselves to be taken by maidens, as our people suppose, but are quite of a contrary nature.<sup>40</sup>

Besides the use of the word “Unicorne,” which plants a seed of the mythical for the audience, the Frampton translation is much shorter and without explanation that is added in the Marsden translation. Not only does Marsden apply modern terms to what Polo did not have the vocabulary to describe, but Marsden has the benefit of other MSS unknown to Frampton which he uses to identify Polo as someone who disputed European travel conventions of his time. Nonetheless, this comparison shows that Polo’s story did have fantastic elements that made it popular in the Late Middle Age, whereas relatively modern translations have wore down the luster.

With Conti, because the MS history is not riddled with the same confusion about which MS comes from where, the differences in English translations are not nearly as pronounced as they are with Polo. Hammond cleaned up the John Winter Jones translation of the original

<sup>39</sup> Marco Polo, *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, Together with the travels of Nicolò De' Conti*, trans. & ed. John Frampton and N. M. Penzer, (London: The Argonaut Press, 1929), 103-04.

<sup>40</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 248.

Poggio text (see above, “Explanation of Primary Sources”) in 1963 and is only modernized and slightly different from Frampton’s 1503 translation (appended to Marco Polo’s *Travels*) from a Spanish version.<sup>41</sup> Because of this, even the most modern English translation retains Poggio’s sense of novelty when writing what Conti had told him about his adventures.

Both Polo and Conti stumbled across the three uncommon phenomena listed above, cannibals, mythical animals, odd sexual practices, to varying degrees on their respective journeys. First of all, cannibalism has long been a taboo in western culture that has drawn fascination. Our travelers were typical Venetian merchants raised in the Catholic faith and taught that man was made in the image of God and hence, although not explicitly prohibited by scripture, eating another human being would be blasphemous. Therefore it surprised Polo and Rustichello to hear about people in these far-off lands eating human flesh. In fact, Polo adds that especially in Zipangu (Japan) the people actually prefer it as it is unsurpassed in flavor.<sup>42</sup> In a twist that also indicates Conti’s notice of the currencies on his travels, on the island of Batech (Northern Sumatra) the people ate the bodies of their enemies and then used their skulls to trade for goods.<sup>43</sup> An interesting point in comparing these travelers’ stories about cannibalism is that in Conti’s account of this, there is no judgment related by Poggio that would indicate how Conti felt about this practice. But in the modern translation of Polo’s accounts, there is a judgment made in the narrative by the author. For instance, while describing the practice of suffocating sick family members, then eating their remains to keep vermin from taking the deceased’s soul,

<sup>41</sup> Breazeale, “Editorial Introduction,” 106.

<sup>42</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 241. for comparison with Frampton: Marco Polo, *The Most Noble and Famous Travels*, ch. 106.

<sup>43</sup> Poggio Bracciolini, in *The Travels of Nicolo Conti, in the East, in the Early Part of the Fifteenth Century, from India in the Fifteenth Century. Being a Collection of Voyages to India, in the Century Preceding the Portuguese Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope; from Latin, Persian, Russian, and Italian Sources*, tran. & ed. R.H. Majors (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1857), 9.

the text reads “They observe this horrible custom.”<sup>44</sup> These comments are probably the result of the author’s reaction rather than the traveler’s. Though Conti and Polo probably equally looked on these practices as wrong, Rustichello was writing with the intent to create interesting literature while Poggio had more scholarly aspirations for his work.

Taboos about sexual practices also drew the attention of our travelers, and in the same manner the texts have different ways of showing us how Polo and Conti felt about these unusual practices. Both travelers mention in several instances that they come in contact with cultures that practice male dominant polygamy, where one man has many wives. Such things were not that uncommon in the Near East and in European history. What stands out to our travelers is the reversal of this practice, where women are encouraged to have many men. Again the Marsden translation has Polo exclaims, when explaining the preference for women who have had more sexual encounters with strangers over virgins, “A scandalous custom, which could only proceed from the blindness of idolatry, prevails amongst the people of these parts (Tibet)...”<sup>45</sup> Conti also tells Poggio of a similar custom in India that reverses the “normal” order of polygamy. Once more, Poggio is strait-forward with his writing and does not give an opinion on the practice of one woman having many husbands. Conti even tells Poggio that they had a system so that the husbands would know that another husband was already with the wife where they would leave a mark on the door.<sup>46</sup>

Another interesting sexual phenomenon which both travelers left a record of is the islands that segregate the sexes off the coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Polo describes it simply like this:

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<sup>44</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 250. Frampton: Marco Polo, *The Most Noble and Famous Travels*, ch. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 171. for comparison with Frampton: Marco Polo, *The Most Noble and Famous Travels*, ch. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 23.

“There are two islands within about thirty miles from each other, one of which is inhabited by men without the company of women, and is called the Island of Males; and the other by women, without men, which is called the island [sic] of females [sic].”<sup>47</sup> He goes on to describe how the men are allowed to visit for three months during the year, how the sons are raised with their mothers until the age of twelve, and how the labor is divided.<sup>48</sup> It is clear that this detailed description shows that Polo found this arrangement very worthy of notice. Conti, who usually explains customs in more detail than Polo, lags behind on his description of this same occurrence witnessed over 120 years later. By contrast, his description is very brief, and the distances are in conflict with Polo’s. Conti told Poggio that one island had men and one had women and they would sometimes visit the other island, and the distance between the islands was 100 miles instead of Polo’s recollection of 30 miles.<sup>49</sup> Conti did tell Poggio one other detail, one that Polo refers to as a sacrifice. If a member of the opposite sex stayed past the other island’s visiting time, they would “die immediately” in Conti’s words, leaving the reader to imagine what this might mean.<sup>50</sup> This is another example of how the modern translation of Polo takes some of the mystery out of the story while Poggio’s story retains its mystery. Also, the shorter description by Conti could be an indication that European horizons had broadened enough to include this part of the world by his time. Perhaps the area around the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula were not as noteworthy in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century as they were in Polo’s time, and therefore, Conti did not wish to spend much time describing it since Polo had already done so. Yet for Conti, these

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<sup>47</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 278. Frampton ch. 126.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

unusual customs he witnessed stuck in his memory and helped confirm, along with many other parts of his account, Polo's earlier report.<sup>51</sup>

Polo's "unicornes" mentioned above along with certain sea creatures, strange birds, and even a breed of sheep that was later given his name, are all products of his limited vocabulary and have since been found to be based on real animals. On the other hand, Conti's story includes some unexplainable animals. The first example are the birds used to get diamonds off of a mountain by tossing meat from an adjacent peak and waiting for the birds to bring the diamond laden meat back to the people.<sup>52</sup> The second example is the winged serpents with seven heads that can kill men with their breath.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Poggio writes that Conti confirms Lactantius' Phoenix when Conti claims that there is a bird in Central India that gathers dry wood and burns itself, but leaves a worm among the ashes that turns into another bird.<sup>54</sup> Whether Conti witnessed any of these three fantastic tales is unlikely for more than just the obvious reasons. Throughout the account, Poggio rarely puts Conti into the places he is describing and it is hard to tell what Conti has seen and what he has only heard about. For instance, scholars generally conclude that Conti never actually traveled to Cathay because he does not describe any of the areas that he would have had to travel through to get there. They chalk up his description as knowledge he gained through other merchants. In this way, it is likely that the most incredible stories that still stand out as fantastic to the modern reader were told as stories to Conti by the locals and fellow travelers he encountered. For that matter, one of the most persistent criticisms of Polo has been connected to debates about how much of what he wrote was told to him and

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<sup>51</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>54</sup> 38.

how much he actually experienced. For Rustichello, and to a lesser degree Poggio, these fantastic elements that these men brought back with them were completely believable and livened up the stories to make them what curious Europeans loved to read.

## Religion

Though some might joke that the religion of the Venetian merchant was and always will be money, the fact is that our travelers were living in a time and place where a person identified themselves as a Christian before all other labels. The examples of Polo #1 and Conti #1 above are typical in the way that each of these men thought about the people they encountered on their journey. In some places they paid very close attention to the religious practices of the people and in some places it appears that the travelers are looking very hard to find signs of their own religion. Rustichello, Poggio, and Tafur put special emphasis on the Eastern Christians throughout their storytelling in order to encourage a hope of gaining Christian allies beyond the lands of Islam. In fact, the legend of Prester John was given a lift by each of our travelers because of this hope. There is a key difference in the journeys of Polo and Conti which was touched on above but needs review before the subject of their encounters with different religions is examined. Remember that the Polos are returning on a diplomatic mission to the Pope from Kublai Khan. They are expected to return to the Grand Khan with 100 learned Churchmen and holy oil from the Holy Sepulchre, but they only travel back to the Khan with the oil and two abbots (who turn back almost immediately).<sup>55</sup> Conti has of course traveled through the East disguised as a Muslim for 25 years, a fact that changed his outlook on the religions he encountered compared to the open Catholic life Polo was allowed to live on his travels. Yet no matter what religion Polo or Conti describe, they make it clear that it was not their own. The

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<sup>55</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 20,23.

following examples examined here will illustrate just how our travelers and the authors who wrote their stories felt about the religious curiosities of the East.

Just as we saw with the other comparisons, Polo's text contains much more opinionated language than anything Conti has to offer. Polo's text also comes off as favorable to the Khan who employed him, his father, and his uncle. Polo illustrates both of these characteristics when explaining the Khan's approval of various religious festivals. Polo writes that the Khan explained his openness to religion in this way: "There are four great prophets who are revered and worshipped by the different *classes* of mankind. The Christians regard Jesus Christ as their divinity; the Saracens, Mahomet; the Jews, Moses; and the idolaters, Sogomombar Khan [Buddha], the most eminent amongst their idols."<sup>56</sup> A few lines later Polo adds, "But from the manner in which his majesty acted towards them, it is evident that he regarded the faith of the Christians as the truest and the best..."<sup>57</sup> While idolaters are looked down on by Polo, it is clear from the texts that he openly hated the Muslims who were everywhere scattered throughout the East. He often referred to them as barbaric and greedy, and in one instance he claimed that their beliefs lead them to commit "every crime, and allow them to murder those who differ from them on points of faith..."<sup>58</sup> At times it seems like Polo was more of an anti-Muslim writer than an observant traveler. To go further, in his chapter on the castle named Thaican, Polo bluntly states that "The people are Mahometans, and are blood-thirsty and treacherous. They are given to debauchery, and to excess in drink..."<sup>59</sup> Polo did not have many bad things to say about the idolaters in China, but Polo and Conti both mention the power some of the idolaters had

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<sup>56</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 113.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 59.



concerning geomancy and witchcraft in other places. Polo noticed in India “Brahmins, who, by means of their diabolical art, have the power of constraining and stupefying fish.”<sup>60</sup> and Conti also encountered Brahmins who can start and stop storms, see the future, and converse with demons.<sup>61</sup> Both travelers were outside of their element in these places and looked to find the best way to describe religious customs that were far outside even what they understood about Islam and the result is that the stranger the customs of idolaters, the less interested Polo, Conti, and their authors are in the Islamic practices they witnessed.

Though they noticed many different religious customs among the different cultures they encountered, they were truly excited about the Christians in the East. Both Polo and Conti make the distinction that the Christians they encounter are Nestorians or Jacobites and heretical, but there is still a sense that each traveler took some comfort in finding them in the same way Americans like finding a McDonald’s in Europe. Francis Rogers asserts that travelers like Polo and Conti would have left Europe with the idea that there were Christians in the East. Not only was the legend of Prester John prevalent throughout the Middle Ages, there was also the story of Saint Thomas preaching to the Indians. Both of these stories would have been in the back of the minds of any European traveler of the age.<sup>62</sup> What is interesting about comparing the accounts of Polo and Conti in regard to Prester John is that Polo talks about Prester John as a figure who once ruled where the Mongols rule. In Pero Tafur’s account of Conti more than a century later, Prester John is a real Christian king that rules over many other kings in India and one whom Conti serves in much the same way that Polo had served the Khan. Prester John even arranged

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>61</sup> Bracciolini, *The Indies Rediscovered*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> Francis M. Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 28.

Conti's marriage according to Tafur.<sup>63</sup> Whoever this Prester John was that Polo and Conti included in their story, he was not the great East Christian king of legend. What they did find, which can be proven, were Nestorian Christians. Poggio wrote of them as being "scattered over all India, in like manner as are the Jews among us."<sup>64</sup> These Nestorians were not the remnants of St. Thomas' Eastern Church, but the descendents of the followers of Nestorius who fled to Persia<sup>65</sup> and then spread across Asia after the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Polo and Conti not only noticed these Christians, they also claim that there was a rival church bureaucracy in the East. Rogers makes the conclusion that Polo and Conti talk about a patriarch of the Nestorians in Mesopotamia, "who supplied bishops for the St. Thomas (Nestorian) Christians in Malabar."<sup>66</sup> If this is true, then that means that the Muslims made a distinction between these Christians and those in the west, which allowed them to live peacefully among the Muslims even as Conti was forced to be disguised.

Our Travelers shared another experience in the East. They each claimed to have made the pilgrimage to St. Thomas' tomb in India. Polo's story about the tomb is another fantastic account. He claims that the descendents of those who slew St. Thomas still live near the tomb and cannot get near the tomb because of the "supernatural power of the holy corpse" to repel them.<sup>67</sup> Conti relates that the Apostle is buried in a large church in Malepur (Mylapore) where

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<sup>63</sup> Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, trans.& ed. Malcolm Letts, (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 1926, 2005), 85.

<sup>64</sup> Bracciolini, in *The Travels of Nicolo Conti*, 7.

<sup>65</sup> The main point of faith that created the break with Rome for the Nestorians was the heresy that Christ's human and divine natures were separate within his person.

<sup>66</sup> Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians*, 48. Found in Polo, *Travels*, 35 and Bracciolini in *The Travels of Nicolo Conti*, 33. Conti says that this information was gathered from a Turkish speaking traveler he met along his travels.

<sup>67</sup> Polo, *Travels*, 260.

the Nestorians worship and he tells us little else about this Shrine in the Poggio account.<sup>68</sup> The Tafur account goes into more detail about St. Thomas, but it is difficult to determine if it is Tafur attributing his own thoughts to Conti or Conti's actual recollection of Tafur. In any case, the description includes a story about how Thomas performed a miracle by lifting a tree that no other person could lift, making a roof for his chapel out of it, and being buried under this chapel. He then described how Christians made the soil from his tomb into pellets that could be worn around their necks.<sup>69</sup> This tomb and the presence of Christians on their journey gave our travelers an illusion that Christianity was more ingrained in the East than it actually was, and this is the feeling that was created by men that wrote Polo and Conti's accounts. In the same way that these travelers went into the East with an expectation of Christian strongholds and came back with tales that fanned the flames, the readers of these travel tales went in with the same expectations and came away with their appetites satiated.

## Reception

The MSS of Polo and Conti's stories in Europe took completely different paths (see above, "Explanation of Primary Sources"), and the receptions each of these stories had back in the West were equally different. Thubron remarks that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century "Marco Polo's book was largely disbelieved, or accepted only as pure fable."<sup>70</sup> Lerner points to the comments of an idle podestà in the village of Cerreto, Guidi called Amelio Bonaguisi, about copying a Tuscan MS of Polo to show the mood of the literati towards Polo's work:

to pass the time and to keep melancholy away. Since these seem to me incredible things; and what he says seems to me not so much lies as more than miracles. And yet what he speaks of could be true, but I don't believe it – though in the world one finds very different things from one country to another. But these, it seems to me – though I've

<sup>68</sup> Bracciolini, in *The Travels of Nicolo Conti*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, 94.

<sup>70</sup> Colin Thubron, in Polo, *Travels*, xvi.

enjoyed copying them – are things not to be believed nor to give faith to, so it seems to me.<sup>71</sup>

Ironically, even though Marco's story was considered to be unbelievable by people like Bonaguisi and fell in popularity in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the travel tale that nearly swept it off the map was even more unbelievable, and this was the book of Sir John Mandeville.<sup>72</sup> Polo's story still circulated under the shadow of Mandeville, and on some maps the influence of his accounts can be seen. Besides finding evidence in cartography that people read Polo and that Columbus famously kept a copy of Polo with him on his voyage in 1492, it would take another 57 years until Ramusio posthumously published a second volume to his *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, which included his version of the Polo story.<sup>73</sup> Ramusio did more than just reprint Polo's story with some of the more fanciful tales that had come along in the MS tradition. He lobbied on Polo's behalf, even contending that Polo was a greater explorer than Columbus and those who followed him because it took "enormous greatness of soul" to pass over the land as opposed to being blown by the wind.<sup>74</sup> From then on Polo's story has remained relatively popular, but less for its geographic content than for its literary value and its MS history, which became something of a hobby for Orientalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Conti's story never gained the popularity that Polo's had, yet it was critical in legitimizing many parts of Polo's story. It was also very important for map makers. Again in Larner, a patrician named Jacomo Barbarigo writes his opinion of reading both of our travelers. He writes: "I, Jacomo Barbarigo, have read this present book of Marco Polo and I have found many things that he says to be true, and this I testify through the revelation of Ser Niccolò Conti,

<sup>71</sup> Amelio Bonaguisi as given in Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 133.

<sup>72</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Penzer, intro to: *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, Together with the travels of Nicolò De' Conti*, xxvii.

<sup>74</sup> Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, 107.

Venetian, who has been a long time in that part of India...”<sup>75</sup> Some of the maps that are said to be influenced by Polo and/or Conti include the *Catalan Atlas* (1380), *Catalan Mappamundi* (c. 1450-60), the Fra Mauro *Mappamundi* (1457-59), and the Genoese World Map of 1457.<sup>76</sup> Both accounts have remained important for scholarly research into early European/Oriental encounters along with Ludovico de Varthema, Afanasii Nikitin, and other Europeans that left records of their travels in the East. Even though Polo wins the popularity contests, these early travelers each contribute valuable insights on how Europeans in the Late Middle Ages felt about how they conceived the East.

## Conclusion

If their stories are to be believed, our travelers spent nearly 50 years in the Orient experiencing first hand what the ancients had only hypothesized centuries ago. Yet it would be many more centuries before Europeans developed any kind of semblance of a true picture of what the Far East was about. It could be argued that the West still lacks a basic understanding of the cultures and customs that Polo and Conti encountered. N.M. Penzer, writes of Polo’s significance like this, “The marvel of Polo’s achievement lies not only in the fact that he was the man who first drew aside for Western eyes the curtain veiling the ‘mysterious East,’ but that so many of the places visited and localities described remained unvisited again for over 600 years.”<sup>77</sup> Of course he does not mean that Europeans had not traveled in the Far East after Polo. Jesuits priests like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Portuguese and Dutch traders, and many other Europeans had in fact reached every part of the East 600 years after Polo. What he is referring to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>76</sup> The first 3 are listed in Lerner, 148. The Genoese World Map is mentioned by Lincoln Davis Hammond in *Travelers in Disguise*, xv.

<sup>77</sup> Penzer, intro to: *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, Together with the travels of Nicolò De' Conti*, xxxi.

is the way in which Polo's vision of the East set the backdrop for what Europeans thought they knew about the East until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was thanks to the efforts of Rumusio in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, long after Polo was buried at his parish church in Venice. Therefore, Penzer's comment does not dispute the conclusion that in the years between Polo and Conti, little seemed to change in the European idea of the East. It is likely that the rise of humanism and popularity of Mandeville in the years after Polo actually turned back whatever intellectual progress was made by reading Polo. This can be seen in Conti by the inclusion of legends like that of the Phoenix, and seven headed monsters which have no basis in reality, but were told to him by locals. Polo might have talked about seeing unicorns and other strange things that he could not explain, but at least he did not jump to the conclusions inspired by ancient legends based on hearsay. Yet there is evidence that Conti did see the Near East differently than Polo. While traveling in Syria, Persia, and on the east coast of Africa, Conti does not seem shocked, or relate anything in great detail in the same way that he describes India and the lands he visited beyond it. This might be evidence that the *oikoumenē* had naturally grown out beyond the Levant to the Caspian Sea, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf since Polo's time. Yet this does not amount to any great difference in what our travelers experienced in the lands still outside the known world. Perhaps the best evidence that little had changed in Europe between the time of Polo and Conti is that, with the help of the authors who wrote their stories, these two Venetian merchants, as was illustrated in Polo #1 and Conti #1, tried to categorize people, places, and phenomenon in familiar terms that were easy for Europeans to grasp. Poggio, Ramusio, Hakluyt, and many other European authors continued to use the same basic formula of describing places unknown to Europeans. It was not until much later that Europeans made a true effort to understand the East, instead of exploiting it, that the attitudes towards it started to change.

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